

2009 ADDRESS BY SPEAKER RON RICHARD

Representatives, ladies and gentlemen, special guests, staff, families and friends...good afternoon.

To my family and my wife, Patti, thank you for all of your support and the many sacrifices you have made along the way. I would not be here today without you.

To the members of the body, both returning and new, thank you for giving me the great honor and responsibility of serving as your Speaker for the 95th General Assembly.

As your Speaker I am committed to guiding this House in much the same way I have led my committee over the years. For those who have served with me, you know my approach means working with members from both sides of the aisle to find common ground.

For those of you who are newly-elected, you should be aware it also means that while I am willing to compromise, I will stand firm when necessary – and I will always stay true to my own conservative beliefs.

It is an approach that has served me well, and year after year it has resulted in legislation that has received overwhelming support from this body.

Under my chairmanship, the Economic Development Committee has worked together regardless of party affiliation to create innovative and productive legislation. On almost every occasion, the bills we passed received unanimous approval as a result of the work we did together. And each piece of legislation the committee has carried to the floor has received strong bipartisan support with well over 100 votes.

This success is the product of hard work and a commitment to fostering good relationships with all members of the body, and the results speak for themselves. As your Speaker, I plan to continue this approach as we work together on the issues facing our state.

As Speaker, I also ask you to commit yourselves to working harder than ever before.

All of you are here because you are dedicated to working intently to serve the people of your district and our state, and this session I ask that you exhibit that determination in every action you take.

That means showing up on time and ready for business for each committee hearing and each time the gavel drops in this chamber.

It means conducting yourself in a professional manner that befits the great honor you have been given to represent the people of your district.

It means preserving the decorum of this storied chamber in a way that pays tribute to the piece of living history that is this Capitol building.

I ask that our new members be ready to put in long hours and to make each decision with the wisdom of a veteran legislator, even though your legislative experience may be lacking.

I ask our returning members to provide the leadership that will inspire not only your fellow members, but also the people of this state whom you serve.

To our committee chairs and vice chairs, you will be asked to do more than ever before, and to serve as the leaders you truly are as we do the work of the people.

The same can be said for our senior committee members from the other side of the aisle. Your input is both valued and needed.

This session brings with it great challenges and the only way to meet those challenges is by working together.

Just as I asked the members who have served on my committee to put aside their differences for the common good, I will ask the same of you as a legislative body.

The issues we face this session demand that kind of approach if we are to succeed in the common goal we all share, the goal of making Missouri a better place to live, raise a family and do business.

We all know that right now times are difficult for far too many Missourians. Parents are struggling to pay the bills as they work to provide for their families. Skilled and industrious Missourians find themselves out of work and unable to find the kind of jobs that will ensure a higher quality of life. And our seniors continue to face the task of enduring these tough economic times on a fixed income.

The difficulties are many and the challenges we face as a legislative body are imposing, but even as we acknowledge the obstacles we face, it's important we appreciate how much easier our task will be thanks to the work of this body in recent years.

Yes, we enter this session with a great challenge but we have only to look at some of the states around us to see how fortunate we truly are.

While we enter this session with a budget shortfall of more than 300 million dollars, our neighbors to the east in Illinois are facing a budget gap of 2.3 billion. Combined, states across this nation must find a way to make up some 32 billion dollars for the current fiscal year, and another 65 billion for the next.

Meanwhile, here in Missouri, the sound fiscal planning of the past provided us with budget surpluses when many other states struggled to deal with deficits. And even though the sharp economic downturn transformed what was projected to be a surplus into a possible budget shortfall, Missourians can rest assured the right leadership is in place to provide solutions that will mean not only a balanced budget, but a better quality of life as well.

In 2009, we will be asked to rise to the challenge of doing more with less, and again we will provide solutions that give Missourians renewed faith that we are here with their best interests at heart.

All across this state, hard-working Missourians are faced with very real problems—problems that will be addressed not by a federal government caught up in some sort of bailout extravaganza, but by us here in state government and, more specifically, here in the Missouri House.

We pride ourselves on being the House of the people.

This year we will make that much more than a convenient piece of political jargon. We will make every effort to provide the people of this state with the kind of substantive relief that will make a real difference in their lives.

This year I call on the body to join together in passing legislation resulting in a Family Recovery Plan that will provide meaningful solutions to the problems faced by Missouri families.

For Missourians struggling to find employment, we must build on our efforts to attract and create good-paying jobs with benefits. I believe if you give Missourians the opportunity to obtain good-paying jobs that so many of the other problems they face will be addressed. Someone with a quality job has a greater sense of pride and fulfillment as they are able to earn a meaningful income, put food on the table and provide for their children.

In turn, working Missourians contribute to our economy and keep it growing during the roughest of economic times. It's a simple but proven approach and I firmly believe it has helped place our state in a fortunate position when compared to so many others.

As part of our Family Recovery Plan, I ask you to work again this year to expand the Quality Jobs Program. The program has become one of our state's most powerful economic development tools, and has resulted in tens of thousands of new good-paying jobs with benefits.

This year we should generate and design programs that produce even more of the jobs Missourians need to weather the current economic downturn.

We also look at every incentive and program that will make our state an attractive destination for businesses looking to relocate.

We're in a global economy so we must do everything we can to ensure Missouri is the clear choice. That means providing innovative and new ideas to create jobs and training our work force to be ready to fill the jobs they generate.

My goal is nothing less than to make Missouri the most attractive location in the world to do business, to work and to live. This session, we will make significant progress toward making that goal a reality.

While economic development and job creation can solve many of our problems, there is more we must do to help our working families. For families stretched to the limit trying to pay their bills and their taxes, we must do what we can to make the cost of living more bearable.

This year we will work to simplify our tax code and provide a modest tax cut to all Missourians. In these tough times, putting money back in the pockets of our citizens is a solid investment. Every extra dollar they have is one they can use to help make a house payment, pay for utilities or put food on the table. Those are dollars that flow back into our economy and offset any revenue we may lose as a result of a tax cut.

This year we will provide meaningful tax relief to the many Missourians currently struggling to make ends meet.

One area we all can agree is vital to Missouri families is affordable and accessible healthcare. Ensuring that Missourians have access to jobs that provide healthcare benefits is one way to address this problem, but there is more we must do if we are to create a system that is truly responsive to the needs of families.

That includes not only improvements to access and affordability, but also increasing accountability and transparency of insurance companies, healthcare providers and hospitals. Our healthcare system must be one that provides quality care to those in need, but it must do so without bankrupting our state – and we must continue to eliminate waste, fraud and abuse from the system.

With the Family Recovery Plan we must also address the often overwhelming costs of utilities and fuel. That means turning to the abundance of natural resources for which our state is known, and utilizing that untapped potential so that it becomes a reliable source of energy for Missouri. As part of the Family Recovery Plan, we must take a close look at the benefits of clean coal technology and what it can mean for the energy needs of our state. We must invest in wind farms to provide electricity to thousands of homes. We must explore the potential of the streams and rivers that flow through our state, and the power they can generate – by investing in hydroelectric technology.

And we must work to make the new nuclear plant in Callaway County a reality. The current plant has served as a safe and efficient power source for decades. It is time we build on that success by creating Callaway II, III and IV to meet the energy needs of this state for years to come.

These primary issues – job creation, tax relief, affordable healthcare, and investment in alternative energy sources – make up the core of our Family Recovery Plan. This plan is a common sense solution that will provide substantive relief to the men and women who want nothing more than to work and provide a better life for their families.

As I said before, training a skilled workforce is a key component to economic success. Missouri's economic engine is its people, and it is only through efficient and strong schools that guarantee every child the right to a successful education – that our economic engine can realize its full potential.

Our universities and community colleges are a vital part of the plan that will develop our workforce and draw new business to our state. Even in a difficult budget year, we are willing and ready to work with them to ensure a quality education that results in future success.

This year we also will reaffirm our commitment to protecting the lives of the unborn. We have instituted policies that have greatly reduced the number of abortions in our state, but we must continue our efforts to ensure Missouri holds life sacred.

We also know that Missourians want a free and open society where they have the right to carry a gun – whether to hunt or to defend themselves in times of need. Regardless of how the national political landscape changes, here in Missouri we will continue to advocate gun rights and support the people's right to carry.

These issues and more will be on our agenda this session as we work to serve the interests of the people. We know the challenges are great but the need to meet those challenges is even greater. Millions of hard-working Missourians are counting on us to provide them with real answers to the problems they face.

So I ask all of us to commit to working together to achieve the goal of providing meaningful help to Missouri families.

I am ready and willing to work with all of you from both sides of the aisle to make the Family Recovery Plan a reality. And I am ready to work with our new Governor and the new leadership in the Senate to address these and other issues facing Missouri.

With your help, we can make Missouri the world leader in creating jobs.

With your help, we can modestly reduce the tax burden on our hard working families.

With your help, we can provide access to quality affordable healthcare.

And, with your help, we can craft real solutions to Missouri's growing energy needs and reduce our dependence on foreign oil.

It's time we fulfill our promise to the people of Missouri by adopting a Family Recovery Plan – so that these and other issues facing Missouri's hard-working citizens can finally be resolved.

Together, we will find solutions to the problems faced by Missouri families. And together, we will move closer to achieving our goal of making Missouri the best place to live, raise a family and do business.

Thank you.

May God bless you and may God bless the State of Missouri.